

it's quicker and easier

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by [hesitantlitmus](#)

Summary

Vesemir once told them that the mutagens to dull emotions were in the first round of mutations so that they could still focus as their classmates dropped off, one by one. It's what Barmin had told him. It's the truth, he knows, but not entirely.

The last wolves of Kaer Morhen reflect on becoming witchers after the death of their mentor in the Battle of Kaer Morhen.

Notes

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The title for this fic comes from Hozier's song [Eat Your Young](#). I am very excited for the next album.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

"I don't think I've ever seen Lambert cry before," Geralt says, much later when the bodies are only ashes in the funeral pyre.

Eskel sighs into his tankard, "I have."

Geralt simply quirks a white eyebrow at him, seeking elaboration.

Eskel sighs again and rolls his eyes, "We all cried when we got here Wolf. I cried and you cried, Lamb cried too."

Geralt hums his acknowledgment, but Eskel continues, "And then there was training and the grasses. I remember you crying Geralt. I remember Lambert too."

Geralt had been on the path when Eskel had volunteered to help with the last class. Lambert was sharp and fragile, a sliver of broken glass ready to shatter into coarse sand. But he was quick and mean and wicked smart. All the spite in him fuelled his progress, channeled directly at Vesemir their teacher and mentor, but Eskel still remembers the little boy wiping angry tears from his eyes when he became frustrated with the Pendulum; he still remembers the gentle muffled sobs coming from his cot in the dormitory at night; still remembers his screams and tears as the grasses shook and tortured him.

Eskel will never admit it aloud, but he is glad the formula for the grasses was lost in the sacking.

*

Vesemir once told them that the mutagens to dull emotions were in the first round of mutations so that they could still focus as their classmates dropped off, one by one. It's what Barmin has told him. It's the truth, he knows, but not entirely. Once upon a time, maybe it was true that witchers felt nothing, but it's been so long that he thinks maybe he has learned how to all over again.

He had said it so matter-of-factly that it should have been a shock; he wanted to make it clear that there was no place for doubt in the keep's old walls. A doubtful witcher is a dead witcher. Yet, that is not entirely true either - he had doubted. Still does. He doubted Luka when he said he knew a shortcut through Old Speartip's cave that would help with finishing the Trial of the Medallion. He doubted Varin when the grumpy bastard had tied a blindfold over his eyes and left him in the forest for a week. He doubted Grandmaster Rennes' decisions in most things. He doubted Geralt would live through the second round of mutations and he doubted that Lambert would survive the first. He doubted Eskel could maintain his humility, or that Geralt would be able to keep his penchant for nobility and goodness. He doubted Lambert would retain his sharp wit and soft heart. So yes, Vesemir doubts.

“Emotional witches are dead witches,” he says again, voice rough from seasons of disuse.

Lambert snorts in response and Vesemir is not surprised, considering Lambert’s derision about most things. Yet, Vesemir knows that without this knowledge, Lambert would have crumpled under the first signs of loss he experienced at Kaer Morhen. Geralt shakes his head but otherwise lifts the spoon back to his mouth. Vesemir narrows his eyes at the white-haired man, biting his tongue against the sharp vitriol that he could spit at his son. Geralt’s emotions lead to Blavikin, Cintra, and Cirilla. They lead him to danger.

Eskel is the one to lash out, “Then why have you gone all soft on us old man?” and whilst his tone aims for joviality, Vesemir is not so simple as to miss the angry edge to it.

He looks around the table at the last of the Wolf School and scowls; this is all that is left. Vesemir knows that over the years he has strayed from tradition. It is impossible to hold up centuries’ worth of history alone. He knows that when he dies, most of their story will die with him. But some things, *some things*, have to be held onto, to preserve what is left. To give them something that will keep them stoic and determined when faced with inevitable odds. He knows that he has needed to be cruel to them, to turn them into the men they are today. He has been cruel to them, but the Path is crueller.

Tonight, Vesemir says nothing.

The next day, they run the wall for ten hours.

*

When Lambert wakes, he is shaking and raw at every nerve ending. His muscles and bones still spasm, and he feels as if he has been ripped apart and put back together again. Well, he thinks, I have been. His clothes, loose cotton pants, and tunic to accommodate the fever sweat, have dried tacky and stiff to his skin. His head feels like it’s been split in half by a cleaver and the lights in the room are far too bright. He can smell piss, shit, vomit, and blood; it makes him gag.

“Easy lad,” a grave voice hums beside his head. He turns and squints at his mentor.

“If I’m dead then this is hell, old man,” he croaks out, throat dry from days of screaming and dehydration.

It’s a mark of how far gone he must be that Vesemir doesn’t smack him for the comment.

Lambert tries to sit up, to see his classmates, his brothers, over Vesemir’s shoulders but almost immediately the combined factors of his mentor pushing him back down and his shaking limbs force him to collapse back into the cot. He turns his head to the right instead, trying to peer through the slats to see into the bed next to his. There are some faint moans on

the other side of the room, but otherwise, it is quieter than expected. He tries not to let the panic take him and finds it easier than it used to be. When he sees nothing noticeable, he turns back to Vesemir.

"The others?" he asks, unwillingly. He almost doesn't want to know.

Vesemir looks away then. "You're the first lucid," he says, "Three others are still in the throws." Ten of them had laid down five days ago. Lambert feels the telltale stinging behind his eyes.

"Daniel?" he tries to keep a steady voice, to sound detached and professional like he's heard Geralt and Eskel be, but he cannot shake the little tilt at the end.

The older witcher tilts his head to the corner of the room, where Eskel is sitting next to a visibly vibrating cot, murmuring soft words and wiping over the now grey-tinged face of Daniel. There's a piece of leather between his teeth that looks almost bitten through from the seizures.

But at least his friend is alive. It's more than he had dared to hope for.

Lambert visibly relaxes and winces as he closes his eyes against the pain lancing through his skull. He tries to suppress that shiver that runs through his body. He feels hollowed out and needs a bath and a meal, but he doesn't think his legs will carry him to the baths or the kitchen.

"Not as bad as the grasses," he says at last, voice shot. His mouth is so dry that his tongue sticks to the roof of his mouth, and he can feel the middle of his bottom lip split with no provocation whatsoever. Vesemir slips an arm around his shoulder and tips him up long enough to dribble a water skin down his throat. He drinks greedily.

"Easy, easy," the old Wolf says, like he's talking to one of the horses in the stables.

Lambert rolls his eyes and lifts shaky hands to take the skin from Vesemir. The elder lets it go with a shrug and watches as Lambert skulls it down.

Two minutes later, Lambert just manages to roll to the edge of the cot and vomit up the entire water skin. Vesemir gets a basin under him just in time.

"Told you to take it easy," he grumbles.

Lambert only manages to huff and lay back in the hard cot with a thunk.

Vesemir wipes his face with a wet cloth that smells more of sweat than water. He wonders idly how many other boys the cloth was used on. He pushes the redhead's hair from his clammy forehead, and for a moment Lambert thinks he sees pride in those leathery features, but just as quickly it's gone again.

"Clean that up when you're done here," Vesemir says gruffly, rising to his feet, "I expect you at dinner."

*

Daniel seizes one last time while Lambert is sitting at the table with Vesemir and a few others for dinner.

Eskel shuffles into the hall, meets Vesemir's eyes, and shakes his head, lips downturned.

Lambert doesn't come down from the Eastern turret for two days.

Vesemir says nothing.

*

Eskel's legs can barely hold him up. He feels like he's been at this for days and Remus isn't looking much better. He wipes the blood off his cheek from where Eskel had landed a blow. Remus frowns down at his hand but smiles weakly at Eskel when they make eye contact.

"Sorry, Remus," Eskel mutters, not enough breath to say anything else.

"None of that!" George barks, "Get up! Both of you!"

He reaches down and hauls both boys to their feet, "Sparring ring, now!"

Eskel's heart sinks to somewhere around his navel. He scrambles into the ring, Remus hot on his heels, and turns to face his friend.

"You made a choice," the dark-haired man barks, voice booming over the courtyard. The other boys in their class don't stop their exercises but still cast furtive glances over.

"You chose to become a witcher. So, it's time you started acting like it," George snarls at them.

Eskel tries desperately not to flinch; it was hardly a choice. Agree to become a witcher and undergo the trials or be left to the woods, to try and find his way back to a home that didn't want him. His chances of survival were slim either way and at least at Kaer Morhen, he could guarantee a meal. George is baring his teeth at them both, and between the wolf pelt around his shoulders, the grey streaks just above his eyes, the yellow eyes, and sharp incisors, he really does remind Eskel of a wild wolf, so it's almost like he was left to the mountains anyway.

"Yes, Master," the boys both say.

"Then you will fight," he says, "And whoever loses will be tossed down the mountain blindfolded and made to find his way back." The grin on George's face is sickening. Eskel's heart sinks to the soles of his feet.

He won't survive that.

"You are opponents," George growls, "so start acting like it!"

He steps back, just out of the ring, "Allez!"

Remus lunges. Eskel parries, barely.

He doesn't even know what they're fighting for; does he need to knock Remus down? Disarm him? Make him bleed? Eskel feels sick at the very thought, but he's already done it once today.

Remus lunges again, and the look in his eyes is wild. Eskel ducks under the swing and follows his own momentum around to kick Remus in the back and send him sprawling. Eskel takes the moment to look at George to see if that's enough, but the witcher watches on with bloodthirsty eagerness.

Eskel's heart beats faster, panic rising like bile in his throat. His limbs shake with adrenaline and exhaustion. Redoubling the grip on his sword, he lunges at Remus on the ground, but his friend is fast and wily, in a way Eskel struggles with, and Remus rolls into his back and meets Eskel's strike at the same time he kicks out at Eskel's knees, forcing him back lest he breaks his leg.

It gives Remus enough time to roll to his feet, but as soon as he is up, Eskel is on him again. Remus might be fast and agile, but Eskel is bigger and stronger. He swings hard, maintaining only enough distance between them to keep his sword up. Remus needs room to be quick, and Eskel is strong enough, and just fast enough to keep the kind of blows coming that ring up Remus's arm; just enough vibration to slacken the grip on his sword. Eskel swings again, smashing the flat of his steel against Remus's wrist. The smaller boy howls and there's an unmistakable cracking sound of bones shattering.

Immediately Eskel backs off, horrified at himself. Remus transfers the sword from his broken hand to the other and gestures to Eskel to move forward, gritting his teeth and begging him not to stop. Remus is barely upright; he won't survive a night in the wilds around Kaer Morhen. There's hardly any meat on his skinny 13-year-old frame as is, and Eskel knows his friend can't stomach the diet they have been fed. Just this morning Eskel slid a bucket under Remus's chin to catch his breakfast. If he keeps going, Remus will die.

"No," he says quietly, "No, I'm done."

"Please," Remus whispers, eyes welling up, "Please don't."

Eskel drops his sword and coaxes Remus forward, "Come on."

Remus might be quick, but he is the smallest and weakest of their class. Eskel pretends not to see the way Varin and George place bets between each other whenever Remus is subjected to another challenge or trial. His friend is hardy, but not hardy enough. Small, skinny Remus, who snarls that he doesn't need help but cried on Eskel's shoulder this morning after he'd finished retching. Remus, who crawls into Eskel's bed at night and presses his freezing toes against the other because he misses the warmth of the coast. Remus, who, despite being the smallest and weakest, is still here, against all odds.

"It's okay," Eskel whispers to him, "Take the shot."

He turns to look at George with as much loathing in his eyes as he can muster. Remus sobs as he lifts the sword one last time and slices it into Eskel's arm, deep enough for the blood to run freely and drip off his fingertips.

George looks furious; his eyes flash and he opens his mouth in a snarl that is sure to rip Eskel apart when another voice rings across the courtyard.

"Enough!" Vesemir's voice rings out.

He's striding forward with a purpose Eskel rarely sees the old Witcher possess. He's younger than George, Eskel knows, but not by much.

Remus stumbles forwards and into Eskel, trying to stop the bleeding with his good hand, while barely keeping himself upright. Eskel props him up, covering Remus's hand with his own. The cut hurts, he'd be lying if he said otherwise, but he's almost too exhausted to notice. Everything around him has taken on an almost dreamlike quality.

Vesemir eyes them both momentarily and then turns his steely amber gaze back to George.

"What was the consequence for the loser?" He grinds out.

George's answering smirk is revolting, "Forest eyes," he says.

Vesemir grunts and turns back to the two boys, "Infirmary," he says, striding away. Eskel loops his good arm around Remus and stumbles after Vesemir, without a backward glance.

He undertakes the Trial of the Grasses a week later. He doesn't think he will live through it, but he does because Destiny is a bitch. So does Remus, so he doesn't mind too much.

Witcher George is furious about it.

Vesemir says nothing.

*

Around him, Geralt can hear the others screaming and crying. It hurts his ears to the point he thinks they may bleed. It hurts his heart too. He squeezes his eyes shut and starts counting, just like his mother had taught him.

He can feel the mutagens in his veins; it feels like he's on fire, but all hotly contained inside his skin. Geralt grits his teeth against it and keeps counting. It's manageable pain, truly, like a fever, or what he imagines being roasted over a fire feels like. That makes him smile a little; Eskel would like that comparison.

He turns his head to the cot on his left and tries to peer through the slats at Eskel's thrashing body, but Luka blocks him.

Geralt blinks up at the red-headed man, "How's Eskel?" he manages to croak out.

Luka frowns down at him, "He hurts, the same as they all do. What of you Wolf?"

Geralt blinks the sweat from his eyes again and grinds his teeth together, fighting his way through the pain. He can feel every single nerve ending; can feel the way his bones and muscles, nerves and sinew shiver and melt and reform. Fuck it hurts.

He grunts to Luka, closing his eyes again.

Luka wipes a cloth over his face but otherwise doesn't comment further. Geralt keeps counting.

When Luka quietly asks him if he needs a drink, Geralt nods and lets the witcher hold a waterskin to his lips.

When Geralt loses control of his limbs when they hurt so badly that he twitches and shakes, Luka asks if Geralt wants to be tied down, so he doesn't hurt himself, and Geralt nods.

When he inevitably begins seizing, Luka puts the leather strap in his mouth. When he stops, Luka asks if he would like it removed, Geralt, of course, nods.

Luka does not comment on how the seizing means Geralt has pissed himself, more than once. Nor does he ever comment on the tears that track down Geralt's temples when he realizes he can't control it.

Finally, when the shaking and seizing stop, Geralt opens his eyes. The first person he sees is Luka. Around them, Geralt can hear the creaking and scrambling of his brothers fighting their way through the Grasses. He tries to sit up and see Eskel, but Luka stands in the way again.

"You don't want to see them right now Geralt," he frowns gravely, "Trust me."

Geralt does, of course, Luka has always been fair and honest. It's what Geralt likes the most about him, that this witcher still retains something noble even with a harsh life on the path.

"It's done," he says, putting a hand on Geralt's shoulder. The younger flinches and Luka lifts his hand away knowingly, "It'll be sensitive for a while, but nothing a soak won't be able to fix."

That night, after Geralt has bathed and eaten, he makes his way slowly back to the dormitory he knows will be empty. His ears ring with their newfound strength and he shies away from the lit sconces every dozen feet up the hall.

In the distance, just inside the labs where he was learning to make bombs only a week ago, he hears angry voices hissing at each other like feral dogs. Amongst them, he hears Vesemir and Dagobert. Grandmaster Rennes' voice echoes down to Geralt and he finds himself suddenly sticking to the shadows along the wall, inching slowly up to the classroom.

"-Grasses didn't seem to affect his lucidity according to Luka," Rennes says.

"His times around the Pendulum have been increasing faster than any other boy as well," Dagobert's pompous drawl intones alongside the rustling of parchment, "He received the same dose as the others only 36 hours ago and already he is upright at the dinner table. Our latest mutagenic experiments only lasted twelve hours with the additional dose, but their retrieval time was twice that of Geralt. An opportunity like this, a specimen like this doesn't just fall into our laps!"

"He's not a specimen, Dogbert!" Vesemir shouts, "He's a boy! A witcher!"

Rennes sighs loudly, "Enough!" he growls, and it makes the hairs on the back of Geralt's neck stand up, "The boy is already up and about. He's been faster than any of the others we have set to this experiment Vesemir. It's a risk, but it is a risk we are going to take, especially with so many of our school dying. We need this, and he is currently our only hope."

Geralt's breath freezes in his throat. He knows, even as he crouches there, hidden in shadow, that they can hear his pounding human heart. He waits for Vesemir's protest, biting his tongue.

Vesemir says nothing.

*

"Do you hate him?" Geralt asks across the table.

Lambert blinks at him, briefly taken aback.

"Does it matter now?" he asks, a moment later.

Geralt frowns, "Yes."

Lambert sighs his most put-upon sigh and sets his empty tankard down loudly, "You're just determined to ruin every drink with feelings, aren't you pretty boy?"

"Just answer the question," Geralt scowls back.

"No, I don't hate him. But yes, I do," Lambert frowns, "It's complicated."

Somehow, Geralt's frown grows deeper, "He was like a father to us."

"Spare me the lecture," Lambert pushes himself up from the bench and stalks his way to the stairs leading up into the castle. He pauses in the doorway, "I get that he did what he could with what he knew, but he perpetuated this system of bullshit. He tortured us because he was tortured. And that's just not a good enough fucking reason," he says before turning on his heel.

"What of Ciri?" Geralt interrupts, "He trained her fine."

Lambert spins back around, eyes alight with fury, "What of the princess? Because he didn't hit her, you think he was a good man?! Cirilla is not a witcher Geralt. It doesn't matter how he trained her; if she were a boy, you can bet she would have ended up just as fucked up as us."

Geralt frowns, "You don't know that."

His brother scoffs, "You're right, I don't. But I know what he did do, and I know he could have stopped it. He thought he was saving us when we didn't need to be saved. And when we did need it, what did he do?"

Lambert stares at him expectantly, "Yeah, that's what I thought. He did fucking nothing."

Geralt spends all night staring into the fire.

*

Early the next morning, Ciri finds Geralt sitting next to the coals of the kitchen fire. She's a young woman now, but still, when she stumbles in, blanket tucked around her shoulders, Geralt sees the eleven-year-old he brought to Kaer Morhen because Destiny had demanded it.

Something warm and protective and dangerous curls around his heart.

Ciri sits on the bench next to him and leans her head against his shoulder. Her voice is scratchy from crying when she asks, "What now?"

Geralt thinks Destiny is bullshit, but he has Ciri, and he always will. That counts for something.

"Whatever you want," he murmurs into the top of her hair, "But let's just sit a while longer."

He thinks this counts for something too.

End Notes

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